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ABSTRACT

Role play (a dramatic technique in which individuals improvise behaviors that illustrate acts expected of persons involved in defined situations) has several advantages for the classroom. Role play: (1) involves little or no additional instructional costs; (2) allows students to practice behaviors and skills; (3) closes the gap between training and real-life; (4) allows for immediate instructor feedback; and (5) can be used to motivate students and change attitudes. The steps to conducting a role play include deciding on the skill/behavior to be learned; developing a scenario; assigning character roles; giving participants and observers specific jobs; conducting a brief warm-up; running the scenario; and holding a debriefing to discuss role-play interactions and behaviors (rather than students' acting ability). At J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC), role play is utilized in a pediatric nursing course to enable students to demonstrate their acquisition of specific nursing skills before they provide direct nursing care to pediatric patients. The most common scenario involves the nursing student explaining a medical procedure that will be performed on a child to the child's mother (played by the faculty member). Students not only demonstrate procedural knowledge, but also develop interpersonal communication skills. Role play is also utilized in group situations to discuss moral and ethical aspects of nursing, and to give students a sense of the duties of charge nurses responsible for a group of student nurses by having students simulate their role. Other professional fields could also benefit from role play techniques at the training level. (PAA)

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INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years education has been equated with textbooks and lectures. Socrates is usually pictured as surrounded by students waiting for pearls of wisdom to tumble forth. The learner is often seen as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. The teacher has all the answers and as such the teacher's job is to present a set of facts in the "best" possible fashion. The student memorizes the information, prepares to regurgitate it on the test and everyone is happy.

BACKGROUND

In the 1920's psychodrama began to appear on the educational scene. Used from kindergarden thru graduate school to aid in sensitivity training and the acquisition of values it has over the following seventy years been expanded and refined to teach a variety of skills.

Parallel with the growth of role play have been some important changes in the very philosophical basis for education. The questions raised include:

Is learning teacher-centered or student-centered?
How much is learning concerned with facts; how much with attitudes; how much with application?
Can learning be made active rather than passive?
How can classroom learning be related to real life?
Should teaching be tightly structured or is there room for flexibility?
Can self-motivation be built into learning?

Different teachers will have different answers to these questions, but we believe they are questions all of us need to consider as we change and adapt our teaching methods.

Role play is the name given to one particular type of simulation that focuses attention on the interaction of people with one another (Van Ments, 1983). Lowenstein (1989) defines role play as a dramatic technique that encourages participants to improvise behaviors that illustrate expected acts of persons involved in defined situations. (We would like to expand the definition of role play to include not only psychosocial behaviors but also psychomotor skills.)

Role play in its simplest form involves asking someone to imagine that they are themselves or another in a particular situation. They are then asked to behave as they feel that person would. As a result of role play, the student, the rest of the class, or both will learn something about the skill(s) presented.

Situations may be simple or elaborate; learning may occur through observation or participation. Skills or techniques may be learned; or role play may be used to sensitize the student or the observers to a variety of situations; or learning may involve a change in attitude.

ADVANTAGES

Advantages of role play are many. Beginning with perhaps the most mundane but important in our cost conscious educational environment role play is free! It can be done anywhere with very little in the way of props. Role play also allows students and faculty to explore attitudes and feelings within the safety of the classroom.

Role play allows students to empathize with others and understand their motivations. By placing oneself in the role of another we are often better able to feel what it is like to be in another's situation.

Thirdly, role play allows the student to practice a behavior or skill within the relative safety of the classroom.

Next, role play can give a feeling of immediacy to content which no amount of instructor feedback can. Just because we tell you that what we teach is important doesn't mean you believe it. Actually being placed in the situation is more apt to make a believer out of the student. Thus, role play closes the gap between training and real-life.

Because role play requires the involvement of the student it is more highly motivational for some students than the promise of a good grade.

Role play allows for immediate feedback. In today's society where students are primed for instant gratification this can be a real plus.

Role play can be used to change attitudes. In fact in a study done with fifth graders moral development was enhanced as measured by principles developed by Kohlburg. (Traviss, 1974)

Role play allows the student to practice skills. Everything from how to apply for a job, to what a mother who has lost her baby feels, to how to do a complex dressing change while also interacting with the patient. For those in business it might include hiring or firing or how to present an important business deal.

DRAWBACKS

There are also drawbacks to the use of role play. Not all students will throw themselves into their roles with equal fervor. Some may simply refuse to "play the game", while others become nervous and "freeze". Reminding students that the focus is **NOT** on acting ability, but on the actions of the characters may help.

Another problem is that some students may see role play as entertainment or just plain frivolous. This may be handled by the way in which the instructor presents the role play.

Yet another difficulty is loss of control. If the facilitator is not careful, control over what is learned is lost or worse yet large amounts of time may be utilized without a concomitant gain in theory.

PROCESS

1. Decide what it is you want the student (s) to learn.
2. Develop the scenario. Don't put too much time into this. It seems to work best with a minimum of structure. Spontaneity is the key!
3. Assign roles. Depending on the situation to be played out the instructor may wish to utilize instructor to instructor, student to student, or student to instructor interaction.
4. Give participants and observors their job.
5. Brief warm-up.
6. Run the scenario.
7. Debriefing. It is important that the acting ability **NOT** be criticized. If students were acting the part of another it may be easier for them to accept constructive criticism. This is probably the most important part of the exercise.

For those with access to video taping equipment this may be a helpful way of critiquing the scenario. There will be no questions as to who said or did what, when, or how. This may be more important in some scenarios than in others. It is sometimes helpful to allow students to critique their own interactions. For many students this is less threatening than to have peers or faculty offer feedback on their performance. It is important to set up guidelines on feedback; i.e. it needs to be positive not negative and needs to focus on behaviors not the individual.

Now, how do we utilize role play in our content area and even more important, how can you use role play where you are.

UTILIZATION IN NURSING

Role play is utilized in a portion of our pediatric nursing course in an Associate Degree Nursing Program in Virginia. Before our students can provide direct nursing care to pediatric patients at the hospital, they must demonstrate mastery of several technical nursing skills. In a one-to-one situation each student demonstrates the skills to a pediatric nursing faculty member. It is during the demonstration of these skills that the role playing exercise takes place.

Since several of the skills demonstrated require an assistant, the student is notified before performing the skill that a faculty member assuming the role of mother will be their assistant. The student communicates with the faculty member as the child's mother. The scenarios during the skill demonstrations change depending on the student-faculty interaction. The most common scenario used is one in which the mother has never observed the procedure being performed. It is the responsibility of the student to explain the procedure and answer any questions in terms that the child's mother would understand. Our goal is for the student to think before he/she speaks to a patient or family member. During this aspect of role play another goal is for the student to see the nurse-parent interaction as positive collaborative teamwork. It demonstrates the nurse and the parent working together to care for the parent's child.

In the role of the mother the faculty member asks questions about the procedures that the student is performing on the child, the child's diagnosis/illness and general questions about hospitalization and normal growth and development. The student then responds to the questions posed in clear understandable terms that a mother could understand. The role play method provides the student with the opportunity to experiment in her interpersonal communication skills. The student is encouraged to think

about what he/she is about to say to the faculty member before they speak. Through this exercize the student is more aware of his/her communication skills and becomes more attuned to the language that he/she is using to talk to parents. The medical community is comfortable with their own language and often is unaware that persons outside their community do not always understand their explanations or comments. It is important that we teach our students early that they must speak to families in terms that they understand and encourage them to ask questions if they do not understand.

If unsuccessful in their first response the student is able to experiment again with another interaction with the parent. Through this active participation in their learning our students are able to learn more readily. Our interaction with our students is spontaneous and many times directed by the student based on their responses to our questions. It is our desire to make learning fun and we attempt to make this exercise fun for both the faculty member and the students. Many of our scenarios are based on our own real-life interaction with families that has occured during our nursing career.

Within our course we utilize role play in two other content areas. In clinical preconference during the weeks that we discuss values such as ethical-moral-legal decision making we utilize role play. In small groups we role play scenarios such as a child who is born with severe anomalies. Roles are assigned to several students who assume the role of the nurses, physicians, mother and father. After the interaction, as a group, we discuss what was observed. Feelings and reactions of all students who had roles in the scenario are also discussed. Our discussion of values can now be related to a specific situation and therefore can have more meaning to the students than if values is just arbitrarily discussed.

The second area in which we utilize role play is in the clinical setting. During each clinical at the hospital a student in each nursing unit assumes the role of team leader for a group of student nurses. The role of team leader can be equated to the role of charge nurse. The student team leader is in charge of her specified group of students and their patients. Her duties are similar to those of the staff charge nurse. During the time period that the student is team leader she is able to experience real-life situations and study the various aspects of the charge nurse role. The student also gains practice managing problems (on a much smaller scale) that may be associated with the role of charge nurse.

The goals in the use of role play in our curriculum are to improve the student's communication skills, increase their problem-solving ability, decrease their anxiety level when either working with a family member (parent) and/or with someone watching their performance, and increase the utilization of the concept of collaborative teamwork when working with a family member. Not all of our students participate with equal enthusiam. No student is punished for their lack of enthusiasm or acting ability. Students are given feedback immediately after their interactions with the faculty. The positive aspects of their interactions are emphasized. Difficulties are dealt with as they occur.

UTILIZATION IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

The potential use of role play in other curricula is enormous. Any curriculum in which students must interact with others is a potential candidate. Examples of candidates for use include business, other health care disciplines, education, community and public affairs, social work, sociology, psychology, and hotel/restaurant management just to name a few. In the field of business administration, administrators must be able to hire, fire and discipline their employees. During role play the administrator student

would be able to experiment with her interpersonal skills which will enable her to effectively interact with their employee. The student is able to practice potential real-life situations without the risk of making crucial errors. The student is provided direct feedback from the other person playing the role of employee who could be another student or faculty member. If the other role is assumed by a student, then the student can also learn some valuable information by assuming the role of employee.

Role play can be also utilized in situations where counseling an employee or client is required. Role play will give the student the opportunity to experience the feelings and frustrations that might be experienced by both the counselor and the client. The irrate customer in consumer or retail sales can also be a source of frustration for even the most experienced professional. Role playing with students in dealing with the unhappy customer can improve interpersonal skills and assist the student with practice managing problems which they will encounter in their new role after graduation.

Role play can also be benefical in working with students on the concepts of prioritization and time management. Allowing students to role play in various situations which involve prioritization and delegation of responsibilities to members of their staff or team will enable students to gain insight into the process of human interactions and decision making.

Role play has many advantages and few drawbacks. As educators we encourage educators from other disciplines to integrate role play into their curriculum. Interpersonal skills are important skills that must be taught in most curricula, but are often difficult skills to teach students. Role play is a technique that can be used by most and that will enable the student to learn and practice interpersonal skills. Role play offers creativity for both student and faculty member. Remember, all the world's a stage so play the role!

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